

Mercenary networks in East-Central Europe: Foreigners in the court army of John Sigismund Szapolyai (1556-1571)

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The Sixteenth century has been often described by military historians as the „golden age” of mercenary service in European armies. The mobility of soldiers across political boundaries has received particular attention, especially during the last few decades, as a topic connected to broader social phenomena such as migration and cultural exchange. However, the subject of foreign military service in the eastern half of the continent remains largely unexplored, especially in the case of smaller states. The aim of this presentation is to analyse the role of foreign mercenaries in the court army (*exercitus aulae*) of John Sigismund Szapolyai, ruler of the Eastern Hungarian Kingdom, later known as the Principality of Transylvania. In an unstable political context, dominated by conflict with the Habsburgs over the heritage of the Hungarian Crown, John Sigismund and his councillors made constant efforts to consolidate the military potential of their country. One of the implemented solutions was to recruit experienced soldiers from abroad. The origins of these foreign mercenaries, their motivation for seeking service in Transylvania and their capacity to adapt to the particularities of the „war culture” in East-Central Europe are some of the main issues approached in my research.

# **Family - Home - Loyalty: Late Medieval Autobiographies of Foreign Mercenaries Serving in Habsburg Lands**

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In the case of a particularly mobile group of people, such as mercenaries, we usually have to deal with a very scattered source material, making it almost impossible to find out about their ambitions, personal decisions and turning points in their lives. This was especially true in the Middle Ages. By the end of the fifteenth century, however, autobiography and related genres were becoming increasingly popular, even among those who made their living as mercenaries. In some cases, autobiographies could help to avoid “inventing” causal relationships between fragmented pieces of written evidence, but, more importantly, they will also provide an insight into the self-representation and mindset of some men-at-arms.

In my paper, I will focus on three autobiographies (two by noblemen such as Andreas Krabat/Andrija Kuželj, and Christoph von Thein/Kryštof z Týna, one by an anonymous soldier of unknown origin who served for some time in the “Black Army” of King Matthias Corvinus). What these three authors have in common is that, like many of their contemporaries, they began their careers as teenagers or young adults in the Habsburg lands, where they were employed as soldiers serving one master for some time, and then siding with another. Given this extreme mobility, I wonder what the authors wrote about family and home. What role did their original place of origin play, could it be “replaced” by a new one (thus changing their identity), was there a chance of returning home after decades? How were questions of loyalty represented when changing masters?

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## **The Role of the Urban Military in the Military Organization of the Late Medieval Kingdom of Hungary**

The military role of towns and cities is one of the less known aspects of medieval urban life, not only in Hungary but also in Central Europe. An important element of this role is the recruitment of soldiers by towns and cities, the social and economic aspects of which have been little studied. Therefore, this presentation attempts to present the Hungarian urban military of the second half of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century in a Central European context.

For this purpose, I have divided the towns studied in this research into three groups according to their geopolitical position: towns in western Hungary (Sopron, Bratislava), northeastern Hungary (Bardejov, Prešov, Košice) and southern and eastern Transylvania (the most important Transylvanian Saxon towns: Bistrița, Brașov, Sibiu). The principle behind the grouping was that these towns, due to their geopolitical proximity, faced similar challenges and therefore shared many of their burdens, and their joint actions caused that their archival sources complement and interpret each other.

The military, which is the main subject of this presentation, can basically be divided into two groups: 1. the units that defended the town (citizens, guilds, mercenaries) 2. the paid military sent outside the town. I present both groups and, taking into account the regional differences in Hungary, I try to define the social milieu that formed the social base of these military units. After this, I attempted to place the mercenary potential of Hungarian towns in a Central European context, in order to point out the Hungarian and international significance of the mercenaries produced by Hungarian towns.